



Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster's High School Task Force Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster convened a statewide High School Task Force in February 2005 to ensure that Wisconsin high school students continue to graduate with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education, the high-skills workplace, and as citizens of our global economy. Seventy education advocates and leaders, including students, parents, teachers, and high school principals, along with business and community representatives from across the state, were appointed to the Task Force. Twenty-one listening sessions were held throughout the state and a panel of sixteen students addressed the task force. Others shared written essays to communicate their views and share recommendations. The efforts were co-chaired by JoAnne Brandes, Executive Vice President, Chief Administrative Officer and General Counsel for JohnsonDiversey, Inc.; and Ryan Champeau, Principal of Waukesha North High School. The Task Force was charged with looking at national models and various local initiatives aimed at redesigning the high school experience, enhancing student learning and engagement, and strengthening the alignment of high school with postsecondary education and workforce needs.

Call for Action

Wisconsin has always prided itself on its commitment to high-quality, public-supported education. The economic future of our state rests on ensuring our high school students are ready for the workplace, college, and citizenship. A high school education that has meaning for today requires united efforts to actively engage all students in learning and ensure academic achievement and a strong foundation for success. High academic achievement and a rigorous curriculum, required for postsecondary education and workforce preparation, is of paramount importance. It is equally important that educational options and pathways to success not be limited. One size does not fit all. One instructional method does not suit all learning styles.

Serious achievement gaps exist, and the preponderance of evidence indicates that achievement and opportunity gaps will only be closed with determined efforts. Learning to read proficiently is a critical element to be successful

in learning throughout life. An assessment of secondary reading achievement in Wisconsin shows that while many students in Wisconsin read quite well as measured by state and national standards, significant achievement gaps persist among student subgroups. These achievement gaps represent one of the biggest challenges facing Wisconsin and the nation.

Recommendations advanced by the High School Task Force call for embracing change. Innovation, in many dimensions, is an overarching recommendation. Recommendations emphasize the need for rigorous, authentic learning using multiple instructional and assessment strategies; high schools that establish a personal connection for each student; learning plans that help individual students accomplish their goals; and solid business and community partnerships. Strategies related to the recommendations underscore the multi-faceted action that will be needed.

Our tradition of sharing responsibility for education among local, state, and regional entities, requires that extra time and effort must be dedicated to defining desirable outcomes and achieving agreement among multiple constituencies, including school board members, administrators, teachers, parents, community leaders, state and federal legislators, businesses, higher education, and, most importantly, students. Wisconsin has been and must continue to be an innovator in policies, programs, and practices to bring improvements to high schools. A variety of programs, including adolescent

literacy programs, work-based programs, career academies, alternative education programs, youth options, and collaborative programs to improve attendance are currently addressing high school improvement needs. More needs to be done. The recommendations advanced in this High School Task Force Report set an agenda for effective action. We must work together to ensure a high school diploma for the workplace, college, and citizenship.

Recommendations

A. Encourage educators and policymakers to move outside of existing structures and pursue innovation.
--

Embracing the need for change is a top priority in the task force recommendations. Innovation, in many dimensions, is an over-arching recommendation. Districts and schools will need flexibility to try new strategies, including instructional delivery modes, class times and structures, and collaborative relationships among all key stakeholders – students, teachers, parents, business, community and higher education partners – to design and implement changes needed to achieve academic success for all students.

Recommended Strategies Include:

- Allow waivers to engage in innovative practices and guarantee sufficient time for individualized approaches to teaching and learning. Provide flexibility to move outside Carnegie units and required minutes of instruction in structuring the school day.
- Encourage collaboration within the entire education community, including schools, colleges, universities, and technical colleges, to design and deliver programs to meet individual student learning needs and expand course offerings.
- Identify effective, research-based strategies to raise student achievement and create a statewide system to promote effective practices.
- Provide professional development for closing the gap in achievement between students of color, economically disadvantaged students and their peers.
- Fund innovative strategies to increase academic rigor and integration of curriculum at the local level, including creation of new schools, including charter schools.
- Advance best practices that promote equity and accountability.

B. Give students the opportunity to engage in rigorous, authentic learning experiences that are relevant to their learning needs and future ambitions.

All students need to pursue a rigorous course of study to prepare them for higher education, the workplace, and citizenship. However, not all students learn in the same manner. Rigor comes in many forms, and students deserve options for learning that align with their learning style and needs.

Learning is not measured solely in terms of courses taken. Performance-based assessment is important in validating learning. Students need to be engaged in authentic learning experiences that provide the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned. Paper-and-pencil exams, or standardized tests, do not allow all students to demonstrate their full range of learning. Performance-based testing is an important dimension of assessment for many learners.

As multiple instructional and assessment strategies and tools are used, it is important that teachers have opportunities for professional development in order to understand the appropriate uses of various assessment methods. They must also have time to design and implement new instructional and assessment strategies and access to data to measure student progress and learning gains.

Contemporary high school models all stress relevancy to learners as an important element in student motivation and dedication to learning. It is important to look for new ways to actively engage students in learning and allow them to learn in ways that are relevant to them and related to their interests and personal goals.

Recommended Strategies Include:

- Ensure that all students have access to a variety of options for learning, including the arts, co-curricular activities, work-based learning, service learning, and accelerated offerings, to fully engage all types of learners.
- Prioritize adolescent literacy to ensure that students enter high school reading at or above grade level, and address the immediate need to provide funding for literacy programming and staff development at the high school level.
- Examine new models and identify best practices in student learning that are both authentic and relevant, and fully assess the rigor and viability of multiple pathways to academic achievement.
- Promote instructional practice that includes problem-solving and creativity, and prepares students to solve real-world problems and participate as citizens in a diverse and multi-cultural world.
- Provide professional development for educators in the use of multiple assessments, including assessment tools that incorporate hands-on demonstration of knowledge and skills.
- Enhance PK-16 partnerships that foster seamless education to prepare students for success after high school, lifelong learning expectations and citizenship engagement.
- Expand four-year-old kindergarten and quality early childhood programs, and increase rigor in elementary and middle grades to prepare students for success in high school and beyond.

<p>C. Create smaller, personalized learning environments and require learning and lifelong education plans for individual students.</p>
--

Large high schools can be impersonal. All high school redesign models emphasize the need for personal connections. Students stressed that a personal connection is a critical element in their motivation to attend school. In large schools, that is not likely to happen without a specific plan to reach each student in a meaningful way. Each student must have at least one adult who has made a positive connection with them and is actively involved in helping the student plan their educational pathway.

Having a learning plan helps students focus on their learning style, goals, and course of action to accomplish those goals. Plans should be developed as students are transitioning to high school and should be reviewed and updated at least annually, including actions that address post-high school plans.

Recommended Strategies Include:

- Provide an adult advocate for each student to establish a meaningful and ongoing relationship.
- Create an individualized learning plan for each high school student that provides guidance and focus throughout the high school experience and includes transition plans to post-high school goals.
- Re-examine compulsory education, with an eye to establishing meaningful learning and/or work-based options for students.
- Create time for educators to work together to seek meaningful ways to integrate content and instruction, and to collaboratively implement strategies needed to achieve success for each individual student.

D. Promote and enhance partnerships among schools, parents, businesses, and communities, linking community resources with school programs and curriculum.

Providing educational opportunities and ensuring that all students achieve academic success requires collaboration among students, parents, school personnel and the community at large, including government and business leaders. Financial resources are limited. Sharing of learning resources, including equipment and work-based learning sites and community resources, is essential to extending learning options and environments to students.

The importance of collaboration goes beyond the need for learning sites and resources. Helping students see the need for education takes a community approach. Schools must be “of the community” – both a resource for community events and a beneficiary of community resources that provide students with opportunities to learn. The leadership of business representatives is especially important to help ensure that learning is relevant and will adequately prepare students for post-high school plans.

Recommended Strategies Include:

- Establish schools as community centers relevant to family, community, and business needs.
- Use collaborative partnerships among schools, businesses, and community-based organizations to ease the strain of funding limitations. Involve business members in classroom activities and students in workplace sites.
- Promote credit-based work experiences, school-business partnerships, and school-to-work opportunities to link grades 9-12 with post-high school education and employer workforce needs.



Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction